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## **CITY LIFE; How a Church Brings Life to Newark's Little Italy**

By **MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO**

For a century the predominantly Italian-American faithful of St. Lucy's Church have been celebrating the feast of St. Gerard Maiella with a religious procession through the streets of the neighborhood once known as the First Ward.

Most of the Italian immigrants who inaugurated this feast in the city they called Nevarca came from the Southern Italian province of Avellino, where St. Gerard was born and died. Ever proud of their ancestors' local boy who made so good that he became a saint, the widely dispersed descendants of those early immigrants, as well as newly arrived Southern Italians, continue to pour their hearts and souls into the celebration each year.

To the uninitiated, the spectacle can be at once inspiringly devout and shockingly crass, as participants push their way through the throngs to pin ribbons, capes and even blankets made of money in various denominations to the somber cloth habit draping a life-size statue of the saint.

Over the decades, thousands of miracles have been attributed to this 18th-century Redemptorist brother, the patron of motherhood who is often invoked by those praying to conceive or to insure a joyous resolution to a difficult pregnancy or labor.

"You'll see people who are trying to have a child walking in the procession," said Michael Immerso, who wrote "Newark's Little Italy: The Vanished First Ward" (Rutgers University Press, 1997). "You'll see them the following year walking in the procession pregnant. You'll see them the following years walking in the procession with a baby carriage or carrying that baby. And many of those children are named Gerard."

Mr. Immerso, who is also chairman of the Nevarca Project, said the monthlong series of cultural events here is designed "to get the people who have moved away from the city to reconnect to its institutions."

This year a major cause for celebration is not a single birth credited to the intercession of St. Gerard, but a rebirth of the neighborhood surrounding the church that houses his national shrine. The area around St. Lucy's teemed with life from the 1890's through the middle of this century. That all ended when entire blocks of modest apartment buildings were razed to make way for the Columbus Homes, a forbidding set of eight 12-story low-income housing projects, and the more upscale Colonnade apartments.

With their floor-to-ceiling windows that afford breathtaking views of the Newark and Manhattan skylines, the Colonnades, designed by Mies van der Rohe, are still standing, though their international styling now seems as discordant with the surroundings as when they were first erected. The Columbus

housing fared worse, decomposing into an urban nightmare that finally ended in an implosive cloud in 1994.

In the darkest years of urban decay, when the poor gradually abandoned the inhospitable projects, Msgr. Joseph J. Granato, who has served St. Lucy's since 1955 and been its pastor since 1977, made what he calls "an unspoken pact" with the scattered members of his parish. If they continued to support the church, he would stay.

They did, and determined to revive the neighborhood, he spearheaded the development of the Villa Victoria senior citizen residence and subsidized low-rise family housing, which opened in 1981 across from the church's rectory on Seventh Avenue.

Today, the monsignor's church manages the project.

"It's a nonprofit program," Monsignor Granato said during an interview in St. Lucy's rectory. "The church gets nothing out of it."

Other similarly scaled subsidized town houses, with neatly tended front yards, have been built nearby. Federal mandate calls for 350 more units to be built on the site of the Columbus Homes, which is now vacant.

On Saturday, the feast day of St. Gerard, a two-acre parklike plaza will be dedicated by Archbishop Theodore McCarrick in front of St. Lucy's. Like many sons and daughters of this neighborhood, it, too, will bear the saint's name.

After all, it was only because of contributions generated by the annual feast of St. Gerard that St. Lucy's Church was able to survive when most of its longtime parishioners were displaced.

The money also enabled St. Lucy's to buy a nearby warehouse owned by the Archdiocese of Newark's Mount Carmel Guild. The Newark Housing Authority agreed to split the cost of demolishing the warehouse with the church and to swap the land on which it sat for a piece of property across Ruggiero Place, the street in front of St. Lucy's, which will be rerouted around the new plaza. The intent is "to give a welcoming feeling to an Old World church," says its architect, Mario Barone of MJBarone Associates in Englishtown.

"Without the feast of St. Gerard, we would've been broke a long time ago," admitted Monsignor Granato. "We make at least \$150,000 on the weekend, and that's our reserve for the year. We draw from that."

His expenses include operating the church, which was recently cleaned and restored in preparation for the centennial of the feast, and subsidizing St. Lucy's School, which has been run by the Sisters of St. John the Baptist since they came to the parish in 1906.

"I call our people fiercely loyal," said the monsignor. A capital campaign generated additional funds to pay for the design and construction of St. Gerard Plaza. "Before a shovel went into the ground, we had four hundred, five hundred thousand dollars in donations on blind faith. They believed it was going to be done."

Although St. Lucy's has only about 250 local families registered as parishioners, it has a mailing list of 2,300 names. Last year, 40 busloads of devotees, including five buses from Canada, took part in the St.

Gerard celebration. Previously, the monsignor had ordered about 50,000 small medals bearing a likeness of the saint to be distributed to those who come to or make a donation in honor of the feast. For the centennial this year, he ordered twice that amount.

He is not concerned that his church, which can accommodate about 1,000 with standing room, will be overwhelmed by the crowds expected to attend the dozen Masses to be said on Saturday and Sunday, as well as the other religious observances and festivities throughout the week. His attitude, he said benevolently, is "Announce the feast, open the doors, and get out of the way."

But it is precisely because Monsignor Granato stood his ground that St. Lucy's and Newark have a reason to celebrate. When asked what happened to the neighborhood around the church that he has served since his ordination in 1955, he said simply, "Urban removal."

Later explained his comment as "a slip," and that he had meant to say "urban renewal." Whether intentional or not, his statement neatly summed up 50 years of drama and trauma.

In its heyday, from about 1880 to 1925, the First Ward was the most densely populated Italian neighborhood in Newark, which had the fifth highest Italian population in the country, Mr. Immerso explained. It was alive with grocery stores, shops and restaurants that were later frequented by such celebrities as Joe DiMaggio, George Raft, Jayne Mansfield, and Billie Holiday.

Most of the residents lived with members of their extended family in turn-of-the century buildings whose interiors had been upgraded over time. Urban planners, however, deemed these apartments tenement slums, and a \$40 million urban renewal plan announced in 1952 called for the demolition of a large tract in the heart of the neighborhood, in front of and behind St. Lucy's.

Homeowners were given market value for their dwellings. With nowhere to live until the new housing was complete, most of them moved into two-family homes in other parts of Newark or nearby communities, said Mr. Immerso. The businesses that supported them shut down or, likewise, moved on.

"This was supposed to be, according to the designers, housing in part for the Italian families that lived here," Mr. Immerso said. "That's why it was called the Christopher Columbus Homes. In reality, it displaced thousands of people, it undermined the rest of the neighborhood, and it gradually became the repository for poor families over the next 10 years who were suddenly living in a city where there was housing but not the manufacturing, not the downtown area to support them."

Italians were not the only ones to be displaced. "There were also black families living in the First Ward," said Mr. Immerso. "The neighborhood was overwhelmingly Italian, but just about every conceivable ethnic group in the city of Newark was represented in the First Ward."

As more black and Hispanic families moved into the projects, which became the all-too-concrete symbol of the destruction of a treasured way of life, relations among the various groups grew tense.

This urban renewal effort failed primarily because it called for too many families per acre, about 100, according to Joseph Bianco, director of redevelopment for the Newark Housing Authority.

"High-rises for low-income families at this density doesn't work," Mr. Bianco said. "Low rises allow people to carve out a piece of the environment that they can relate to without anyone above their heads or below their feet. It's a human scale."

It's a scale he grew up with until he was 16, living in his grandmother's two-story home above Carpentieri's Bakery at High Street (now Martin Luther King Boulevard) and Seventh Avenue. "That neighborhood in any direction was one-, two-, three-, four-story buildings," he recalled, evoking his days as a newspaper delivery boy. "The projects dwarfed the church; they blocked out its light."

Today, across Seventh Avenue from the vacant site, a brick oven created in 1904 forms the back wall of Original S. Giordano's Bakery. Crumbling buildings flank the rundown facade of this venerable shop, the last of 42 bakeries that once thrived in the area and which counted Frank Sinatra among its steady customers. When asked about the revival of the area, Monica Giordano, whose husband, Stephano, is a descendant of the bakery's founders, said: "We've been listening to that for years. I'll believe it when I see it."

She described the new residents as "transients" who are not interested in supporting local businesses. To attract the area's primarily Hispanic residents, whose children make up 70 percent of enrollment at St. Lucy's School, the church offers services and prayer groups in Spanish. Monsignor Granato finds encouragement in the fact that members of the local Haitian community have told him that St. Gerard is venerated in their homeland.

Mr. Immerso, who divides his time between his home in Lunenburg, Mass., and the Clifton Avenue home of his parents, where he grew up, hopes that the St. Gerard centennial and the Nevarca Project will bridge differences among the city's ethnic groups and give them a common purpose in reviving its fortunes.

To this day, his parents, who grew up two doors from each other in the old First Ward, are active volunteers at St. Lucy's entrusted to help the nuns in the convent painstakingly unpin the money from the statue when it returns from its two processions, unfold it and count it before it is deposited in the bank. Last year, recalled the elder Mr. Immerso, the saint was so fat with currency that "they had to bend him over in order to get him inside the church."

His son says: "This church only exists because of this unusual relationship between the devotion to St. Gerard and the devotion to this church. Without either of them, neither of these things would exist."

The church's cornerstone was laid on Dec. 13, 1891, the feast of the Sicilian martyr, St. Lucy, venerated as a protectress of good vision. She is, perhaps, an ideal patron for the church, even though its pastor maintains: "I'm no visionary, I'm no great planner." Remarkably, St. Lucy's has had only two other pastors besides Monsignor Granato.

Under the first, Monsignor Joseph Perotti, the wood-framed original church was replaced in the 1920s with the current brick structure. Over the years, it was embellished with an elegant marble interior and radiant paintings by Gonippo Raggi, who also decorated the interior of nearby Sacred Heart Cathedral. Rocky finances were improved when the second pastor, the Rev. Gaetano Ruggiero, took steps to make sure that any money raised during the feast of St. Gerard would go entirely to the church.

Previously, the revenues were split with the societies that paid for the decorations and entertainment for the feast.

"My grandmother used to tell my mother, 'Don't put any money on the statue in the street,' " recalled Monsignor Granato. "The rule was whatever was put on the statue on the street went to the society. Whatever was put in the church belonged to the church. They would strip the statue right in the street."

In 1977, the National Conference of U.S. Bishops declared St. Lucy's the national shrine of St. Gerard. Two years later, Reverend Granato was elevated to the rank of monsignor. And each October, the crowds come.

"It's a religious event and reunion wrapped into one," said Mr. Immerso. "There's a strong feeling of honoring ancestors by returning to and being still connected to a part of the community that they built when they got here as immigrants."

William J. Connell, who holds the LaMotta Chair in Italian studies at Seton Hall University, will begin conferring a medal each year, named after Monsignor Granato, for distinction in preserving and promoting Italian culture in New Jersey.

Dr. Connell said: "There's been insufficient appreciation of the wealth of the history and culture that exists among the Italians of New Jersey. This 100th anniversary provides a way for us to celebrate a very important aspect of this history -- that someone worshiped by the rural poor in an underdeveloped part of a distant country was central to the creation of the identity of Italians in the United States."

In Newark, a Time to Honor St. Gerard

Following are "Nevarca Project" and religious events in honor of St. Gerard:

Oct. 7-15 -- Nightly novena to St. Gerard, 7 P.M., St. Lucy's Church, (973) 482-6663.

Oct. 11-17 -- Street festivities for the feast of St. Gerard.

Oct. 12 -- "An Evening of Italian Opera and Song," New Jersey Performing Arts Center, 7:30 P.M., (888) GO-NJPAC, tickets \$30.

Oct. 12 -- Anointing of the sick, 7 P.M., St. Lucy's Church.

Oct. 13 -- "Photography and Ethnicity," New Jersey Historical Society, 12:15-1 P.M., (973) 596-8500, ext. 234.

Oct. 13 -- Screening of "Big Night," New Jersey Historical Society, 5:30 P.M., (973) 596-8500, ext. 234.

Oct. 13 -- Blessing of women praying to conceive, 7 P.M., St. Lucy's Church.

Oct. 14 -- Blessing of expectant mothers, 7 P.M., St. Lucy's Church.

Oct. 15 -- Blessing of newborn babies, 7 P.M., St. Lucy's Church.

Oct. 16-17 -- On Saturday, masses in honor of feast of St. Gerard, St. Lucy's Church 7 A.M., 8 A.M., 9 A.M., 10 A.M. (in Spanish in the lower church; in Italian in the upper church), 11 A.M., 12:30 P.M., 6 P.M.; procession leaves the church at 2:30 P.M. Live music 6:30 to 9:30 P.M. On Sunday, masses at 8 A.M., 9 A.M., 10 A.M., 11:30 A.M., 12:30 P.M.; procession leaves the church at 2 P.M. Live music 4 to 9:30 P.M.

Oct. 20 -- "Painted Memories," New Jersey Historical Society, (973) 596-8500, ext. 234.

Oct. 27 -- "Lasting Impression in Print," New Jersey Historical Society, (973) 596-8500, ext. 234.

Oct. 29 -- "An Italian Saint and His Community: St. Gerard Maiella and Newark's First Ward" symposium and presentation of the first annual Italian Culture Medal, 3-5:30 P.M., Seton Hall University, South Orange, (973) 275-2928.

Oct. 30 -- "The Italians of Newark: Spirit and Memory, Past and Present" symposium, 10 A.M.-1 P.M., Rutgers University, (973) 353-5410.

Through Dec. 31 -- "Saluti da Nevarca: A Century of Italian Experience in Newark," Newark Public Library, (973) 733-7793.

Photos: On Saturday, the feast day of St. Gerard, Archbishop Theodore McCarrick will dedicate a two-acre plaza around St. Lucy's Church. The area around St. Lucy's, which teemed with life from the 1890's through the middle of this century, ended when blocks of apartments were razed for eight low-income housing projects and a more upscale apartment. It was only because of contributions generated by the annual feast of St. Gerard that St. Lucy's Church survived after most of its longtime parishoners were displaced. (Photographs by Nancy Wegard for The New York Times)